



Indiana State Department of Health

Epidemiology Resource Center

Quick Facts

About...Chickenpox (Varicella)

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is a very contagious disease that is caused by the varicella-zoster virus which causes a characteristic rash, fever and fatigue. Chickenpox is usually a mild childhood rash illness, but it can cause serious complications, including pneumonia, encephalitis (inflammation of the brain tissue) or viral meningitis (inflammation of the fluid surrounding the brain and spinal cord), bacterial skin infections, and even death especially in older adults and those whose immune systems are weakened.

How is chickenpox spread?

Chickenpox is spread from person to person by respiratory droplets when an infected person coughs or sneezes or by direct contact with the raised or fluid-filled lesions. A person with chickenpox is considered highly contagious for at least 2 days before the rash appears until the rash has scabbed over or completely faded (in mild cases). Much less commonly, a person can get chickenpox from direct contact with a person who has shingles lesions (see ISDH Quickfacts Sheet on Shingles).

What are the signs of chickenpox?

Early symptoms of chickenpox begin 10-21 days after exposure and include fever, fatigue and weakness which often precede the appearance of a rash. The rash first appears as flat, red bumps that become raised, fill with fluid resembling blisters (vesicles) and may severely itch. The rash is most evident on the trunk and will present in different stages of development over several days. The fever may increase when the itchy, blister-like rash appears. Approximately five days after the rash first appears, the blisters rupture and scab over.

Some children and adults who receive 1 or even 2 doses of the vaccine will have a mild case of chickenpox known as "break-through" disease. When this happens, the disease is often very mild with fewer spots (<50) that may not develop into vesicles, but look more like insect bites. A "break-through" case may never develop

a fever during the course of illness. Individuals experiencing “break-through” disease are thought to be less contagious than individuals with more severe disease.

Who is at risk for chickenpox?

Anyone who has not received two doses of chickenpox vaccine or has been previously diagnosed as a case of chickenpox or shingles is considered susceptible to chickenpox. Infants under one year of age and persons over fifteen years of age are at greater risk for complications associated with chickenpox than otherwise healthy children. People with weakened immune systems also are at greater risk for severe illness and complications. Children who were diagnosed with chickenpox before 12 months of age may not have fully developed immunity following disease and may be at increased risk of disease. Chickenpox in pregnant women less than 20 weeks pregnant or during the week of delivery can result in severe birth defects and sometimes fatal illness in the infant.

How do I know if I have chickenpox?

Consult with your health care provider if you have been exposed to someone diagnosed with chickenpox or if you have symptoms of chickenpox. Your health care provider may collect blood or swab samples of the skin lesions to test for chickenpox. Chickenpox is most often diagnosed based on the symptoms you experience. If you have ever had chickenpox or have received two doses of chickenpox vaccine, it is unlikely that you will get chickenpox. Many other organisms can cause rash illnesses than can resemble chickenpox.

How can chickenpox be treated?

Currently, there are no antiviral medications regularly used to treat chickenpox. Treatment focuses on relieving the symptoms of the illness. Oral acyclovir may be recommended for some individuals at increased risk of moderate to severe disease. Over the counter medications or lotions may be used for itching. Fingernails should be trimmed to prevent infection from scratching, and bedding should be changed frequently to help prevent skin infections.

How can chickenpox be prevented?

There is a safe and effective vaccine to prevent chickenpox. If you have not had chickenpox, or have no record of having varicella vaccine, talk to your health care provider to decide if you should receive the vaccine. In the state of Indiana, schools and licensed child care providers require proof of vaccination or immunity to chickenpox for entry into the school. Two doses of chickenpox vaccine provide the best protection against chickenpox. In susceptible individuals a dose of the vaccine can lessen symptoms and prevent disease if given within 5 days of exposure.

All information presented is intended for public use. For more information, please refer to: <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd-vac/varicella/in-short-adult.htm>.

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